

## Including Water Security on the UN Security Council Agenda



Richard Lappin 9th December 2015

### Conflict and Security

Water is indispensable to human survival and economic production. The management of water access has thus become a focal point of tensions between and within states. With **forecasts** of increasing water scarcity, particularly within conflict-torn regions, there is significant potential for water management issues to trigger or exacerbate threats to international security. Against this backdrop, the UN Security Council (UNSC) ought to include water security on its formal agenda.



Definitions of security have moved beyond a limited focus on military risks and arms control to encompass issues of human security and its achievement through development. In recent years, the UNSC has considered the impact of broader development issues on security, including **natural resources**, **climate change** and the spread of **diseases**. By formally including water security on its agenda, the UNSC would acknowledge the centrality of water to human security, and help advance efforts to comprehensively address the roots causes of violent conflict. Formal recognition would highlight the mutual need to share water, which may help galvanise regional co-operation and security initiatives.

Water security is already a critical issue in a number of international peace processes, including in the **Middle East**, **Horn of Africa**, and **Sahel**. It is also an aggravating factor in non-water related conflict zones. In 2012 in Sudan, for example, **violence broke** out at a refugee camp where large numbers of people faced serious water scarcity. Even in conflicts without a water-related component, inequitable or difficult access to water and sanitation services may contribute to existing social tensions and violence, perpetuating the cycle of conflict. Water-related conflict often also occurs at the local level, particularly when there are attempts to privatise water supplies or restrict access to water points.

Looking to the future, water security concerns are likely to multiply. Experts argue that the impact of climate change will manifest mostly through water-related natural disasters, including rising sea-levels, flooding, drought, and reduced freshwater availability. Changes to physical landmass, including possible submergence of island states, eroded coastlines, and new shipping routes, could all contribute to border disputes over maritime and

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territorial rights. These changes will also drive migration thus increasing competition for resources, which could exacerbate tensions in areas with sensitive cross-border dynamics.

Yet, while there is growing support to put water on the UNSC's formal agenda, there is palpable reluctance among some states. Many developing countries have **voiced concern** about the UNSC's encroachment onto socio-economic issues that ought to be dealt with by the more representative General Assembly and Economic and Social Council. Several states **expressed concern** that the UNSC's 2007 discussion on climate change had undermined the mandate of these and other UN organs. Others, including permanent members of the UNSC, argue that the agenda is already too full and that energy should be directed to resolving existing crises before addressing new, future-oriented ones. In the last six months, the UNSC discussed an extraordinarily wide range of security issues.

However, given the threat of water-security issues, it is evident that some reform is needed if the UNSC is to take a genuinely preventative approach to water-related conflict. There are several options. For starters, the many entrenched and static issues currently on the agenda could have a reduced presence. Greater attention could be placed on universal thematic issues rather than state-specific ones (an approach already observable with the appointment of UN Special Rapporteurs); here, water security could be part of a broader theme on climate change and natural resources. Failing this, it would be beneficial to mainstream water security into existent country-specific discussions. To enhance the expertise of UNSC members on water security, professional expertise could be provided through UN agencies, including the UN University. Lastly, other UN mechanisms should remain seized by the issue, including the General Assembly, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and UN-Water, as well as in the implementation of the **post-2015 development agenda** (where water security is one of the 17 sustainable development goals). Indeed, given the complexity of water security, a comprehensive approach will be required by the UN to address the political and socio-economic challenges that this issue poses for both security and development.

### Author profile



Dr Richard Lappin holds a PhD from the University of Leuven on post-conflict democracy assistance, as well as an MSt in International Human Rights Law from the University of Oxford. He has worked on human rights and democracy assistance programmes throughout the world.

#### Citations

Richard Lappin, 'Including Water Security on the UN Security Council Agenda', (OxHRH Blog, 9 December 2015), <<http://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/including-water-security-on-the-un-security-council-agenda/>> [Date of Access].

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